

On the walls of Troy

Michael Donaghy and Emily Greenwood

In this 'Homeric Encounter', the poet Michael Donaghy and the classicist Emily Greenwood react to the meeting between Priam and Helen on the walls of Troy in Book 3 of the *Iliad*. Taking this episode as his starting point, Michael Donaghy's poem looks beyond Homer for its inspiration to playwrights such as Marlowe and Euripides. His Priam has an ulterior motive for comforting Helen; he really wants to get information about the enemy. Priam's words of comfort ('For as the owl plummets down etc.') is a dactylic homage to the metre of the epic.

Music sounds and Helen passeth over the stage

stage direction, The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus

*Fireworks crackle and the groundlings gasp and cough
and a drag queen in stiff brocade and starched ruff
glides across the stage on a starry trolley drawn by ropes.
Puppet. Hellbait. Tricktrap. Doctor, wait! She isn't real.
You're doing all the work. She has no lines –
all smoke and candlelight and burning towers.
Not that peerless dame of Greece, this poxy boy
dangling beneath a spangly sky in Rotherhide
this thirtieth winter of Elizabeth. Curtain.
High summer. Locusts chirrup in the scrub.
Gongs. Ægypt. Enter: Athenian debutante chanting
My name is Helen and I will now recount my sorrows
The gods abducted her, she claims, and sent to Troy
an eidolon of cloud, desire, and big big trouble.
Nobody believes her but they let themselves believe,
these citizens gazing, like adulterous lovers,
through rushlight, moths and incense
toward the still eyes in the white mask.
Look up. Here she is with me up in the gods!
She came to me in tears. What could I do?
I've just been telling her, poor child, she's not to blame
For just as the owl plummets down, talons wide for the dove,
just as the drowned are conveyed by the tides to their homes,
such are the whims of the gods and the long views of generals,
such is our nakedness helplessness innocence hubris
etcetera.
And she's been pointing out the players for me
having brightened somewhat.*

Born in the Bronx and educated in the United States, Michael Donaghy became one of Britain's best loved and most acclaimed poets. He won both the Whitbread Award for Poetry (1989) and the Forward Prize (2000). In 2001, he was short-listed for both the Whitbread and the T.S. Eliot Prizes. His most recent collections of poetry were *Dances Learned* and *Last Night and Conjure*, both published by Picador. Michael Donaghy died on 16 September, 2004.

Priam and Helen in *Iliad* 3

by Emily Greenwood

Although academics and students tend to focus on scholarly literature when analysing and interpreting Homer; one of the richest sources of Homeric interpretation is contained in the works of other poets who have produced their own translations, adaptations or versions of Homer. The Radio 3 series 'Homeric Encounters' set up a series of encounters between academics and poets over extracts from Homer's *Iliad*, each of which involved a pivotal 'encounter' within the poem. One of the assumptions behind this series was that Homer continues to speak to contemporary poets, and that the academic study of Homer has much to gain from listening to these conversations.

'A very literary poem'

The encounter in which I took part involved the acclaimed American poet Michael Donaghy, who had been commissioned to produce his own version of a section of book 3 (lines 141–176) of Homer's *Iliad*. Although the poem was written for a radio production, Donaghy described it as a 'very literary' poem, which gains from being read. To give an example, Donaghy uses lots of short sentences – sometimes one-word sentences – that mimic the convention of the stage direction in dramatic texts:

'Curtain.

High summer. Locusts chirrup in the scrub.

Gongs. Ægypt. Enter: Athenian actor chanting'.

Omnibus readers will have a slightly different perspective on this encounter because the audience listening to the original radio production (broadcast on July 20, 2003) heard the poet discussing his own poem. This kind of artistic self-comment raises interesting questions about the ways in which poets can shape the way in which their work is interpreted, whether through public readings, interviews, diaries, or critical essays. However, in the case of Homer, we lack any such critical intervention on the part of the poet. We don't even know who 'Homer' was.

Michael Donaghy's poem situates itself in relation to other poems about Helen of Troy by means of specific literary allusions. The poem approaches Homer obliquely via drama – both Elizabethan drama and Greek tragedy. Christopher Marlowe's play *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* is cited explicitly and, indeed, performed within the poem, as is Euripides' *Helen*. Less obviously, Donaghy also alludes to the American Imagist poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle). In the radio broadcast Michael Donaghy cited H.D.'s long verse poem 'Helen in Egypt' as one of the sources of inspiration for his poem. The phrase 'the still eyes in the white mask' is actually a quotation from H.D.'s poem 'Helen' (first published in 1924), which begins: 'All Greece hates / the still eyes in the white face./'. Donaghy has substituted 'mask' for 'face' in keeping with his focus on theatricality as a metaphor for fiction and deception.

Donaghy begins with a stage direction from Marlowe's play, and his poem is replete with images of stagecraft and illusion: Helen is a 'drag queen' – a sardonic allusion to the fact that the ghostly Helen in Marlowe's play would have been acted by a young boy ('this poxy boy dangling beneath a spangly sky in Rotherhide'). She is wheeled on a 'starry trolley drawn by ropes'. In view of the way in which Helen is represented in

ancient Greek literature, this last detail could be interpreted as a comment on Helen's agency. From Homer to Isocrates, a recurrent source of debate is whether or not Helen should be held responsible for her actions (note that at *Iliad* 3.164, Priam tells Helen that he does not hold her responsible (*aitiê*), but this contradicts views of Helen's culpability expressed elsewhere in the *Iliad*). The image of Helen being pulled across the stage on a trolley drawn by ropes represents her as a passive object. This is even more explicit in the next line with the description of Helen as a 'Puppet'.

Watching Helen

This passage is the beginning of the voyeuristic tradition of Helen of Troy in European literature. Although this section of narrative is referred to as the *teichoskopia* (viewing from the walls), modern poets have been much more interested in the view of Helen *on* the walls. Influenced by the counter-tradition about Helen found in Euripides' play of that name, Donaghy shifts the scene from the walls of Troy to the upper balcony of a theatre (one term for which is 'the gods'), from which Priam and Helen survey the onstage action. With this clever detail that exploits the ambiguity of the phrase 'the gods', Donaghy blurs theatre history with the divine intervention that is a feature of Euripides' *Helen*. In Euripides' play, Zeus authorizes the abduction of Helen to Egypt and the substitution of the phantom (*eidôlon*) in her place. The narrator in Donaghy's poem interjects that: 'She isn't real. You're doing all the work. She has no lines'.

The possibility that the Greeks and Trojans spent ten years killing each other over a phantom image precipitates questions about the connection between sight and knowledge and the extent to which one should believe one's eyes. This theme is all the more intense because Greek tragedy with its masks, its representations of the heroic past, and its interventions from gods on stage machinery, required the audience to suspend disbelief and to believe the sights on stage as representations, while at the same time not believing in their reality. The fiction works on two levels: firstly, the audience are complicit in the make-believe world of the theatre. Like the character Dr. Faustus who is taken in by a phantom image, the Athenian audience of Euripides' *Helen* overcome their unbelief as they are taken in by the spectacle ('these citizens gazing . . . toward the still eyes in the white mask'). Secondly, they accept Helen's version of events beguiled by their desire for her appearance (they are likened to 'adulterous lovers'): 'Nobody believes her but they let themselves believe . . .'

The Power of the Seductress

In ancient Greek literature, there is a strong connection between rhetoric and seduction, and Helen of Troy becomes the embodiment of seductive speech. She enchants men and makes them lose their resolve. As such, she becomes a universal figure for the seductress. We see this process of seduction happening in Donaghy's poem, where Priam, who is not mentioned by name but is identifiable from the allusions to *Iliad* 3, admits to being taken in by Helen's tears ('She came to me in tears. What could I do?'). Like the elders in Troy who struggle for words to describe Helen and end up reaching for a simile in order to compare the incomparable ('terrible is the likeness of her face to immortal goddesses' – line 158, trans. Lattimore); in Donaghy's poem Priam has a (Homeric) simile that tails off into unconvincing rhetorical platitudes that draw on emotive poetic imagery, culminating in an unpunctuated, open-ended catalogue of human vulnerability which is made problematic by the inclusion of hubris – a noun that indicates a culpable failing as opposed to passive helplessness ('such is our nakedness helplessness innocence hubris etcetera.')

The poem is ambivalent; in the first half Helen is viewed from the perspective of the stage where the narrator points out this she is an illusion. However, towards the end of the poem we shift to a behind-the-scenes perspective where the narrator, although cynical, colludes with Helen. The narrator himself is unreliable and the reader does not know who or what to believe. Classicists might be tempted to think of the anecdote told about Stesichorus, according to which Helen of Troy punished him with blindness as a punishment for maligning her in his poetry, whereupon he retraced the slander and his sight was restored. The narrator in this poem also appears to be under the influence of Helen. This is a good example of an instance where a community of readers (classicists, in this case) might see things in the poem that were not anticipated by the poet, but which enable the poem to grow in scope. Michael Donaghy's version of *Iliad* 3.141–176 is an excellent example of how an encounter between poets separated by almost three thousand years enlarges the scope of both.

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